

On first encounter, Sanou Oumar's intricate pen-on-paper works resemble a set of carefully laid out architectural plans, proposals for future material spaces. However, if these are maps, there appears to be no key by which they can be deciphered. Seductively twisting lines rub up against hard rectangular edges, tiny flecks of ink tremble within the permeated membrane of a perfectly drafted circle while, in amongst this throbbing haze of movement, solid blocks of vibrantly pigmented colour stubbornly anchor themselves in place. There is a tentative balance between this chaos of feeling and the steady certainty of the geometric forms through which they are ordered. It is as though the ephemeral language of the subconscious is being pushed through the hard bodily configurations of Architecture. We are unable to unpick the meaning behind each unit of language; to identify a symbol; a word, and yet we feel their haptic, vibratory power.

Embedded in this architectural vernacular is an unmistakable sense of the sacred. I am reminded of the visionary paintings and drawings of Paul Laffoley, Alfred Jensen, Emma Kunz, Fredrik Söderberg and Hilma af Klint in their creation of complex, abstracted visual systems to drive their explorations into mysticism, esoteric healing practices, sigillate magic and alternate universes, as well as the sculptural work of Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez who, like Oumar, elevated the banal material of the everyday in constructing his sublime architectural models. However, whereas the visionary gaze of these artists was often projected outwards, into the future and the not-yet-there, Oumar's eye is focussed obsessively and meditatively on the already-past and the currently-occurring; mining the joys, traumas and constraints of his childhood growing up in Burkina Faso, and the emotional and physical displacement he currently faces as an asylum seeker in the United States.

The psychic chaos of these experiences, through Oumar's ritualistic daily drawing practice, similarly becomes codified into the ordered, geometric beauty of abstraction. Abstraction here is therefore not a formal exercise, but a kind of meditation. In conversation, Oumar tells me he feels intimately connected to the act of drawing itself, listening only to the sound of "pen hitting paper" as he works in the dead silence of his basement studio. In this sense, the drawings are functional objects, designed to ground Oumar's inner world in the material realities of the present moment while simultaneously serving as its physical record, each one titled simply as the date on which they were made.

Sanou's cosmic exploration of his internal world is materially enforced by the compositional arrangements of the marks presented here. Some of the drawings follow Sanou's usual format: his textural, lyrical gestures are typically held together by a membrane, namely, a circle, evoking molecules encased within bodily cells. Others break from this pattern - the previously contained molecules appearing to float freely on the paper. In these, Oumar's circle appears not so much discarded as out of shot - as if zoomed in with a microscope.

In addition to the use of everyday drafting materials; pen, paper, coloured pencil, felt-tip, Oumar often employs his personal possessions as stencils to guide his hand; his New York Identity card, discarded ice cream spoons, metal washers, milk bottle-tops, oddly shaped clothing tags, as well as more obscure scraps whose original function cannot be identified, allowing them to be appreciated purely for their idiosyncratic forms. The intervention of these objects, however, are completely imperceptible in the completed drawings, holding instead personal meaning for its originator.

These drawings can indeed be seen as architectural propositions, yet rather than suggesting a spatial modification in the external world, Oumar uses the process of codifying his personal experiences as a means of transforming the architectural structures of his own mind. The accumulation of life's half-remembered impressions often embed themselves into our psyche, silently and individually shaping us. The unique impressions of Oumar's experience; his joys, traumas, longings and his desire to transmute these through the geometric beauty of abstraction similarly leave behind their invisible traces, mapping out visionary, incorporeal worlds.

Text by India Nielsen